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MAY 6 1971

Credibility Gap's Birth Traced

'Official Lies' Now Expected To U2 Incident

orig. under
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Special To The Star

Eleven years ago this week, the credibility gap was born.

Today it is a fact of life -- no thinking person can still believe the United States Government doesn't lie.

This turning point in the ethics of American history began on May 2, 1960, when the information office at Incirlik AFB, Adana, Turkey, issued a brief release: A weather recon plane of the U-2 type had vanished the day before on a routine flight over the Lake Van area of Turkey.

The release added that a search had been launched, and the radio contact with the pilot -- identified only as a civilian employee of Lockheed Aircraft -- indicated he was having problems with his oxygen equipment.

As a newsmen working in Germany at the time, this correspondent gave the release only cursory attention. Having visited the air base at Adana several times, I was aware that U-2 "weather planes" were stationed there, so there was no reason for questioning the story.

No doubt the release was read with considerably more interest by the editors of Pravda and Izvestia.

A day or so later, the Air Force issued a second release: Because of the circumstances surrounding the disappearance of the plane, NASA was grounding all U-2 aircraft to check the oxygen equipment.

Summit In Paris

But there was a change in the political horizon. Everyone

was looking forward to the May 15 summit conference between President Eisenhower and Khrushchev in Paris. My assignment was to spend the week in Moscow covering the reaction to the talks, and my visa was approved without hesitation.

Then came the bomb: Speaking to the Supreme Soviet in Moscow on May 5, Khrushchev suddenly departed from his routine report and thundered "Comrade Deputies! Upon the instructions of the Soviet government, I must report to you on aggressive actions against the Soviet Union in the past few weeks on the part of the United States of America.

"What were these aggressive actions? The United States of America has been sending aircraft that have been crossing our state frontiers and intruding into the airspace of the Soviet Union . . . Therefore we must act -- shoot down the planes! This assignment was fulfilled -- the plane was shot down!"

(Stormy, prolonged applause. Shouts "Correct!" and "Shame to the Aggressor!")

As the shock wave ripped across the news wires of the world, in Washington a NASA spokesman conceded that the missing U-2 might have strayed across the Soviet border while the pilot -- listed as Francis Gary Powers -- was unconscious.

An Accident

On May 6, the State Department reported, "An unarmed U-2 weather reconnaissance craft of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration might have crossed the Soviet

Lincoln White, the State Department spokesman, stated, "There was absolutely no deliberate attempt to violate Soviet air space, and there never has been."

The statement was duly published in the American press, along with irate statements from certain congressmen castigating the Soviets for shooting down an unarmed plane.

One British journalist called a top State Department official for an off-the-record statement and was told "Utterly fantastic! Take one technical point alone: the single-engine U-2 has a range of only 2,500 miles -- not 4,000 as Khrushchev's fantastic tale implies."

And the State Department even went so far as to send the Russians a formal note of protest and inquiry regarding the fate of the pilot -- the pilot presumed dead.

Then on May 7, Khrushchev dropped the other shoe.

Addressing the Supreme Soviet again, Khrushchev explained, "I did not say the pilot was alive and in good health, and that we have parts of the plane. We did so deliberately, because had we told everything at once, the Americans would have invented another version."

Sharing In A Lie

It was only then, the newsmen discovered, to their horror and indignation, that they had been participating in a lie. They had believed what they had been told, and so, presumably, had President Eisenhower.

Secretary of State Christian Herter insisted the President had been misled. He admitted the U-2 had probably

made an "information gathering" flight over Russia, but "there was no authorization for any such flight."

Again the press accepted the word of the government, although it was now obvious that someone had sent Powers aloft, quite willing if he were downed (after he had demolished the plane and killed himself with his poison needle) to let America believe that Moscow was the real aggressor.

James Reston of the New York Times noted, "As to who might have authorized the flight, officials refused to comment. If this particular flight of the U-2 was not authorized here, it could only be assumed that someone in the chain of command in the Middle East or Europe had given the order."

Behind the scenes, CIA chief Allen Dulles met with President Eisenhower and offered to resign on May 9 to save the government further embarrassment.

Khrushchev had left President Eisenhower an opening by indicating the deed may have been done without the President's knowledge, and Press Secretary James Hagerty was quoted as saying "in his opinion" he didn't think President Eisenhower had been aware of the mission.

Hopeless Situation

But the situation was hopeless. On May 11 President Eisenhower admitted that he had personally approved the flights because espionage was "a distasteful but vital necessity."

And amid the shambles, both Herter and Vice Pres-